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RUCOWCV/COMCOGARD SECTOR KEY WEST FL IMMEDIATE  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000335

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SECSTATE FOR WHA A/S SHANNON, WHA/DAS MADISON, WHA/CCA  
WILLIAMS, CTC MCCARRY, D FOR MARY SUE CONAWAY FOR THE  
DEPUTY SECRETARY, CA FOR A/S JACOBS, DRL FOR A/S KRAMER AND  
PDAS FARRAR;  
COMMERCE FOR LINO GUTTIEREZ;  
NSC FOR DAN FISK AND MICHAEL KOZAK;  
USCG MIAMI FOR RADM KUNKEL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/21/2118  
TAGS: [SMIG](#) [PGOV](#) [CMGT](#) [CU](#)  
SUBJECT: IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. OF POSSIBLE REFORM IN CUBAN  
TRAVEL REGULATIONS

REF: HAVANA 329 (NOTAL)

Classified By: A/DCM Sean Murphy for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Significant reform of Cuba's restrictive travel policies for Cuban citizens, reported to be imminent, could result in increased illegal migration towards the United States, certainly in the short-to-medium term. Migrant flows would probably be directed through Mexico and Central America, as opposed to across the Florida Straits. Intending migrants would likely find obtaining a visa for Mexico or a Central American country - by whatever means - and then proceeding to the U.S. southwest border, an attractive alternative to a risky sea voyage. While it is extremely difficult to estimate the likely increase, a 50% increase over the FY 07 figure of some 11,000 arrivals of undocumented Cubans at the southwest border is probably reasonable. Some in the Cuban government may view a loosening of travel restrictions and an attendant increase in illegal migration as a means to pressure the U.S. into revisiting the 'wet foot/dry foot policy' and otherwise putting the United States on the defensive with regard to migration. However, in its apparent willingness to revise its travel policies, the GOC is responding primarily to strong internal pressure to remove some of the more glaring and unpopular of the "absurd prohibitions" Raul referred to in his February 24 speech. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Some significant reform of Cuba's highly-restrictive travel regulations appears imminent. At present, Cubans wishing to leave the country -- either temporarily or permanently - must obtain permission from the GOC in the form of the so-called "tarjeta blanca". Cubans wishing to travel temporarily must also obtain an invitation letter from a foreign host duly notarized by a Cuban consulate. Together, these two documents cost about \$300 USD; the need to obtain government permission to travel, and the high costs associated with the tarjeta blanca and the invitation letter, have led many Cubans to regard the entire process as humiliating and offensive. Rumors of a drastic overhaul of exit procedures have circulated for months, and Madrid-daily El Pais reported last week that the decision to eliminate the

tarjeta blanca and invitation letter requirements for most, but not all travelers, has already been made (see reftel).

¶3. (C) If it becomes easier for Cubans to travel abroad, one likely result would be greater illegal migration flows towards the United States, certainly in the short-to-medium terms. These flows would not, necessarily, pass through USINT. USINT's Consular Section would probably see an increase in demand for non-immigrant visa interviews. However, we use a call center-based NIV appointment system, and the current wait for an NIV interview is more than two years (the wait has been relatively stable for the past 18 months and reflects existing interview demand and limitations on USINT staffing levels for both American officers and local national employees.) Because of the long wait -- and the perceived difficulty in obtaining a U.S. visa -- many mala fide Cuban travelers would undoubtedly approach consular sections at the Mexican Embassy or the embassies of the various Central American countries represented in Havana. These embassies have been plagued by visa-selling scandals in the past. The Mexican embassy, for example, had a major scandal in 2002 involving the sale of visas to unqualified Cuban applicants; we understand that the Honduran ambassador in Havana is currently under investigation in Honduras for involvement in something similar. Moreover, Mexican consular officials in Havana have previously complained to us that the peculiarities of Mexican immigration law, specifically, the ability of Mexican citizens to obtain visas on behalf of foreigners, at times oblige them to issue visas to travelers they regard as illegitimate.

¶4. (C) Obtaining a visa to Mexico or a Central American country by fraud, bribery, or some other means would likely be viewed by migrants and their families in the United States

as an attractive alternative to a risky sea voyage, from a variety of standpoints. Flying on a commercial airliner to a destination in Mexico or Central America and then proceeding north would probably be considered as safer, and as having a higher probability of success, than attempting to enter the United States directly from Cuba on a boat. Cuban migrants, of course, simply present themselves at U.S. POEs, rather than hire 'coyotes' and attempt to cross the border through desert or otherwise dangerous areas, given current U.S. parole policy for Cubans on U.S. soil. Pursuing a visa to a third country enroute to the United States may also prove more cost-effective than paying a smuggler upwards of \$10,000 to secure a seat on a go-fast boat to Florida.

¶5. (C) It is extremely difficult to estimate the likely increase in illegal migrant flows, in the event of a dramatic change in Cuban travel regulations. Much would depend on the details of any change. Moreover, in any conceivable scenario, the GOC would have abundant means at its disposal to continue to exercise control over travel. The El Pais report, for example, stipulated that recent university graduates, medical personnel, and government employees with access to state security information would still need to obtain permission to leave. It is worth noting, that these categories form the bulk of the more than 700 cases of U.S. immigrant visa holders who in FY 07 reported to USINT that they were unable to obtain the tarjeta blanca. To apply for a Cuban passport, meanwhile, requires obtaining permission from work places, schools, and other institutions, that could easily be withheld. In FY 07, slightly more than 11,000 Cubans entered the United States without documentation on the southwest border; a 50% increase in this number if the tarjeta blanca and the invitation letter are eliminated is probably not an unreasonable estimate.

¶6. (C) Some in the Cuban government may have the expectation that loosening travel regulations would put pressure on the United States to change its policies regarding Cuban migrants. In such a scenario, a flood of undocumented migrants arriving on the southwest border would generate calls to revisit the 'wet foot/dry foot' policy, dealing a political blow to the Cuban-American community. Meanwhile, dramatically increased demand for NIVs could obstruct USINT

operations and, combined with long appointment wait times and what is likely to be a very high visa refusal rate for many new applicants, cast the U.S. as the obstacle to the Cuban people's right to travel. Nonetheless, in apparently revising its travel regulations, the GOC is responding primarily to its own need to remove some of the most glaring and unpopular of the 'absurd prohibitions' mentioned by Raul in his February 24 speech as ripe for reconsideration.

¶7. (C) USINT has an ongoing dialogue on migration issues with the Mexican Embassy. We are in the process of deepening and extending this dialogue through a formal consular fraud prevention working group with Mexico, Canada, and Spain that will probably meet for the first time during May. We will also broaden existing contacts with Central American embassies to sensitize them to our concerns about the possible use of their countries as transit points for illegal migration to the United States. USINT's Consular Section, partly in anticipation of a loosening of travel restrictions, has been developing a plan to significantly reduce visa appointment waiting times. We expect to begin implementation in next several months.

¶8. (C) We will continue to closely follow discussion of changes in Cuban travel regulations. Future reporting will incorporate consideration of the demographic and sociological factors influencing Cuban migration, as well as the enduring impact of Cuban nationalism on the decisions individual Cubans make. PARMLY